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In: Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, The Philippines Historical and social studies 157 (2001), no: 3, Leiden, 561-608

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Rising in the Far East [the Philippines] in 1914, spreading to the Far West [the Americas and Europe] and rapidly gaining foothold in many parts of the world, the Church of Christ (Iglesia ni Cristo) is viewed by nonmembers as shrouded in controversy and clouded in mystery. [...] The dynamic leadership of Brother Felix Y. Manalo, God's Last Messenger in these last days, is one of the factors that has contributed much to the rapid growth and expansion of this Church. [...] When he died in 1963, not a few [critics] expected the Church to crumble. They were soon bitterly disappointed, [...] for under the stewardship of his son, Brother Eraño G. Manalo, the Church continues to grow by leaps and bounds. (Bienvenido Santiago 1986:39.)

On July 27, 1968, the 54th year of the Iglesia ni Cristo in the Far East, Brother Eraño G. Manalo crossed the Pacific Ocean to establish the Church's first two congregations in the Far West, one in Ewa Beach on the island of Oahu, Hawaii and the other in San Francisco, California. [...] Soon the Church spread to the various metropolitan areas of the [North] American continent, to the ancient and historic cities of Europe and the Middle East, to the Pacific Rim regions of Asia, and [to Australia...] At present, there are more than 400 established locales and committee prayer groups scattered in more than 65 countries and territories around the world. [...] With this growth and expansion of the Church worldwide, there arose a great need for more ministers. To address this need, more than 2,000 ministerial students are now undergoing training at the Institute of Evangelical Ministry (the Church school for ministers) in Quezon City, Philippines [...] The task of preparing ministers for work outside the Philippines falls on the Institute's intensive training programme called Advanced Studies for Overseas Mission. (Sarmiento 1993a:5-6.)

Conceived early in the 20th century during a time of spiritual ferment and shifting sectarian loyalties in the Philippines, the *Iglesia ni Cristo*¹ soon initi-

¹ The Iglesia ni Cristo, or Church of Christ, will often be identified hereinafter as the INC. In the first articles of incorporation registered by the Philippine government on 27 July 1914, the organization was called the Iglesia ni Kristo (Tagalog). Other designations – the Church of

ated a religious struggle with the dominant Catholic Church that even now continues unabated. For the past 86 years, the well disciplined ministers and highly dedicated followers of this indigenous belief system have resolutely disputed many cardinal tenets of Catholicism, including the *ex cathedra* authority of the Pope, validity of infant baptism, creed of Trinitarianism and pivotal role of the Church of Rome as the exclusive vehicle of human salvation. No one familiar with modern Philippine history can deny the considerable success of INC missionaries in promoting apostasy among the majority Catholics, as well as the less numerous Protestants, and in constructing a country-wide community of faith that extends even into the Muslim realm of Mindanao.² Additionally, the INC has projected its influence into the nation's political arena, impacted the social traditions, cultural values and communal loyalties of its more than 5,000,000 Filipino believers, and instituted an incredibly ambitious overseas mission.

Despite the prominent place of the *Iglesia ni Cristo* in Metro Manila, every provincial capital, and thousands of other cities, towns and barrios, the astonishing expansion of this upstart religious brotherhood is a recent phenomenon. For three decades after its foundation in 1914, the INC experienced slow albeit steady growth. While congregations proliferated on Luzon and missions were established elsewhere in the archipelago (Mindoro, Mindanao and the Visayas), the cumulative national membership remained unimpressive. Immediately before World War II, the *Iglesia ni Cristo* had only 40,000 to 50,000 adherents.³ With its evangelistic campaigns curtailed during the war-time years, the INC was still an obscure sect at the dawn of Philippine independence in 1946. Since then, this confidently crusading Church has grown dramatically, supplanting Islam as the second largest religion in the country.

Christ, *Iglesia de Cristo* and the *Iglesia ni Cristo* – were later used in legal documents as well as in a wide range of popular and scholarly publications. Some Church detractors still substitute a 'K' for the 'C' in Christ, though INC leaders rejected this form over fifty years ago. In fact the INC was formally reconstituted and recorded as a corporate entity with the Securities and Exchange Commission of the Republic of the Philippines on 29 January 1946, under the title of the *IGLESIA NI CRISTO* (Elesterio 1977:4-5, 123-51; *Sancta Romana* 1955:334-5, 414-8). A twofold name is always used in English-speaking countries: the *Iglesia ni Cristo* (Church of Christ). Elsewhere in the world, the rendering in parenthesis may be in the dominant local language to guarantee wider recognition.

² For an introduction to the rich and extensive literature on the history, role and changing patterns of religion (Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam and indigenous belief systems) in the Philippine setting, consult Phelan (1959), Gowing (1967, 1979), Elwood (1968), G. Anderson (1969), Demetrio (1970), Majul (1973), Gowing and McAmis (1974), Schumacher (1979) and Fernandez (1979).

³ These figures drawn from the scholarly studies of *Sancta Romana* (1955:340) and Tuggy (1976:68) are probably quite accurate. Interestingly, one respected journalist claimed that the INC embraced at least 85,000 members in the mid-1930s, but failed to document his statement (*De Manila* 1963:46).

In concert with its explosive increase in believers and conspicuous presence in most provinces, the Iglesia ni Cristo over the past half century has become ever more involved in the civil life of the Philippines. It is popular knowledge among Filipinos that ranking INC leaders have considerable influence over local, provincial and national politicians. Whenever Church interests appear threatened, they immediately exercise their latent power (Ando 1969; Tuggy 1976:93-100).⁴ By the same token, the Church of Christ sponsors various social and economic programmes to assist the poor and promote the welfare of all Filipinos; it manages a system of parochial education designed to provide spiritual and secular instruction for adults and children, and it finances communal organizations that serve to inspire and integrate local, regional and national congregations through religious meetings, musical competitions, health seminars, sports activities and self-improvement projects. In addition, the Church operates a highly professional broadcasting system which features radio and television programming (Bible readings, religious discussions, concerts, cultural presentations, dramas, variety shows, public service offerings and newscasts) designed to serve a diverse audience of dutiful brethren and outsiders who might be attracted to the INC. Finally, it uses the monthly magazine *Pasugo* and other publications not only to promote the religious education of members and converts but also to foster programmes of social equity and environmental protection for Filipinos of all faiths.⁵

⁴ General awareness of the INC role in Philippine politics invariably heightens during the months prior to national elections. Throughout such periods of rising partisan fever, the newspapers and magazines of Manila and other large cities are filled with sensationalized and accusatory articles decrying the interference of leaders of the Iglesia ni Cristo in the political process (Rama 1965; Tasker 1992; Cueto 1998). The perceived secular power of the Church gains further credence in the public mind when its officials issue statements offering religious justification for bloc voting by the INC membership (Catañay 1969; Fuentes 1991; Bienvenido Santiago 1994), when ranking Filipino officials personally pay their respect to the group's leader on the occasion of his birthday or following their own election victories (Ty 1961; Fuentes 1998), and when foreign dignitaries (Presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton of the United States, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien of Canada and many others) send congratulatory messages to the INC officialdom during anniversary celebrations (*U.S.-Philippine Times* 1989; 'Messages' 1989; 'Messages' 1997).

⁵ *Pasugo*, or *God's Message*, is the foremost popular organ of the Iglesia ni Cristo and remains a basic source of information concerning its history, doctrines, educational programs and missionary achievements. Containing articles in both English and Tagalog, this attractive publication details the doctrines and ideals that anchor the INC belief system, serves as an effective vehicle for continuing religious education, and helps to integrate the widely dispersed national and international communities of the Iglesia ni Cristo. With its current monthly run of 235,000 copies (*Pasugo* 52-6:7), representing a tenfold increase in circulation over the past 35 years (*Pasugo* 18-5:63), *Pasugo* is also a tested instrument for attracting potential converts to the INC and a powerful device for the periodic rebuttal of criticism by Catholic and Protestant detractors. Likewise, it provides a continuing chronicle of the growing membership, worldwide diffusion, social services and institutional elaboration of this Church (Kavanagh 1961; Fuentes 1999). Information on other INC periodicals is presented in Bocobo (1985).

Justly proud of the INC's rapid development and its laudable social programmes, and keenly aware that the neighbourhood community is a key organizing principle in the common consciousness of Filipinos,⁶ the INC leadership long ago elected to invest enormous human and financial resources in the construction of imposing and architecturally unique houses of worship. The purpose of this was to accommodate swelling local congregations while simultaneously proclaiming the earthly mission of the *Iglesia ni Cristo*. In short, they deliberately utilized the cultural landscape of the Philippines (and later of other nations) to confirm the diffusion and vitality of this newly emergent Church of Christ (Marcoleta 1989). The resultant INC construction effort has produced perhaps 200 truly monumental religious structures in Metro Manila, Cebu and other large cities, approximately 5,000 substantial church buildings and chapels in smaller urban centres, towns and villages throughout the country, and several hundred religious facilities of different sizes in missions abroad.⁷

Certain that the *Iglesia ni Cristo* is the only 'true' Christian Church, the ministers and members work in concert to implement a far-reaching programme of evangelism that has no national bounds. Today, as in the 20th century, they are systematically promulgating their religious beliefs in the largest metropolitan centres and the smallest barrios of their homeland. This unflagging effort generates a steady stream of conversions each year. Late in the 1960s, the INC also launched a pioneering outreach effort beyond the Philippines when a handful of religious outposts were planted in selected parts of the United States with large Filipino-American populations (Rosquites 1969a; Bocobo 1983). The resulting worldwide enterprise has flourished and may in fact be the most successful form of 'indigenous Christianity' to have arisen in the Third World during the past century.⁸ Today a net-

⁶ For historical discussion and spatial analysis concerning the significance of the parish church and community in the Philippines, see Hart (1955:15-20), Phelan (1959:44-84), Reed (1967: 51-71) and Gowing (1967:39-49).

⁷ This writer has been unable to obtain definitive figures on the number and distribution of church buildings owned by the INC. The estimates here have been extrapolated from articles in the popular press of the Philippines, occasional statements in INC publications concerning the number of congregations within and without the archipelago (Dumangas 1994; Bienvenido Santiago 1997), monthly listings of newly dedicated houses of worship in *Pasugo*, and anniversary volumes published by the *Iglesia ni Cristo* (Sarmiento 1993b).

⁸ After decades of neglect, students of comparative religion seem increasingly fascinated by the proliferation of non-Western 'indigenous Christian Churches' in many parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America. These varied forms of Christianity are usually generated within a discrete cultural community, often limited to one geographic region, and generally free of ecclesiastical supervision by foreigners. In his monumental *World Christian Encyclopedia*, Barrett (1982:58-65) presents a useful summary discussion on the origins and distribution of independent native churches, their patterns of religiosity, the comparative ethnic character of these localized reli-

work of Iglesia ni Cristo missions clearly defines the expanse of the international Filipino diaspora. It is composed of some 200 thriving foreign 'locales' (congregations), almost as many 'committee prayers' (informal devotional groups), numerous 'extensions' (dependent congregational gatherings), and countless tenaciously proselytizing lay workers in more than seventy nations (Sarmiento 1993b; Pasugo 2000, 52-6:31-9).⁹

Visionary and founder: Felix Y. Manalo as the Sugo

Even today, some 37 years after the death of its prophet and organizational mastermind, the Iglesia ni Cristo remains profoundly influenced by the theological ideas and managerial legacy of Felix Y. Manalo. It is no exaggeration to say that his visions, teachings and administrative designs continue to provide an enduring blueprint for the doctrinal guidance of dedicated followers and the long-range development plans of INC leaders.

According to supporters and detractors alike, Manalo was an eloquent speaker who fashioned a convincing interpretation of the Bible that appealed to Filipinos across the social spectrum. Not only an inspirational minister, he also clearly understood how to ennoble and energize a growing flock of converts by adopting a distinctive form of worship, recognizing individuals for pious behaviour and secular achievements, fostering routine family devotionals, and involving all men, women, and children in the communal life of their locales. At the same time, Manalo seems to have been a shrewd judge of human character and so selected fiercely loyal lieutenants to help spread the new belief system. Like other founders of modern religious movements in Africa, Latin America and Asia (Hesselgrave 1978:304-11), he was at once a skilful organizer, intense personage and charismatic preacher who firmly believed that God had directly authorized the INC's worldly mission, and he boldly proclaimed such a message. While laying solid ideological and cor-

religious communities, and the likely future of such popular belief systems. The readings in Hesselgrave (1978), including a chapter by Tuggy (1978) on the genesis of the INC, highlight the catalytic role of charismatic leaders in founding and nurturing these Christian communities of the Third World.

⁹ In the sectarian terminology of the Iglesia ni Cristo, the larger neighbourhood clusters of believers or self-sustaining parish organizations are identified as 'locales' or 'localities'. Still heavily dependent on the INC's central authorities in Quezon City for spiritual guidance, financial assistance and administrative support, the 'committee prayers' may be best described as informal assemblages of Church members under lay leadership. They regularly meet in private homes or public halls while mobilizing sufficient resources to build or purchase a house of worship with a nearby parsonage for an ordained minister. Certain of the larger and more prosperous locales support nearby 'extensions' where larger groups of worshippers are on the threshold of becoming full-fledged congregations with a resident minister and permanent sanctuary.

porate foundations for the Iglesia ni Cristo, Manalo likewise inaugurated a costly church construction programme that continues to transform cultural landscapes of the Philippines and other countries with sizable numbers of overseas Filipinos. He well realized that the ongoing building of distinctive houses of worship testified to a unified membership with unshakable confidence in the divine role of the Church as set forth by its founder.¹⁰

Born in a hamlet some 15 kilometres southeast of Manila on 10 May 1886,¹¹ Felix Manalo was raised in a rural setting by his devout Catholic parents Mariano Ysagun and Bonifacia Manalo. With their livelihood based on a combination of agricultural work, shrimp catching and mat making, they were humble people who lived on the edge of poverty.¹² During a childhood disrupted by his father's death, his mother's remarriage and the Philippine Revolution, and an adolescence overshadowed by the Filipino-American War, Manalo received only a few years of formal schooling. In the course of farming, fishing, petty trade and handicraft work with family and friends, however, he did acquire an impressive range of practical manual and social skills. Some writers suggest that even as a teenager Manalo exhibited innate leadership ability and exceptional oratorical aptitude, which he later utilized to gather converts and fashion an enduring institutional framework for the INC (Alonzo 1959:5-7; Tuggy 1976:17-20).

Late in the 1890s, after a telling lapse of faith, the teenage Manalo rejected Catholicism. At the time he resided in Manila with his uncle Father Mariano Borja, a priest assigned to the urban parish of Sampaloc. Severely rebuked for privately studying the Bible, Manalo began forthwith to question many basic Catholic doctrines. He also sought solace in other religious groups. He followed a lengthy spiritual peregrination, which led from one localized mystery cult through four Protestant denominations, before setting

¹⁰ The life and accomplishments of Felix Y. Manalo as the founder, chief administrator and spiritual leader the Iglesia ni Cristo are surveyed in a systematic, though not always sympathetic, fashion by Kavanagh (1955), Sancta Romana (1955), Alonzo (1959), Sanders (1962), Tuggy (1976) and Elisterio (1977). For hundreds of short, standardized and eulogistic commentaries on Manalo's legacy by members of his Church, consult Pasugo (1939-2000). Typical of these are Garcia (1964), A. Meimban (1984), Crisostomo (1986), Bienvenido Santiago (1989b) and Bocobo (1994a).

¹¹ Felix Manalo's birthplace – Calzada (a *sitio*, or hamlet) in barrio Tipas, Taguig municipality, Rizal Province – was a tiny rural community consisting of poor farmers and fishermen late in the Spanish era. In recent decades it has been engulfed by a sprawling industrial region that now marks the northwestern shore of Laguna de Bay.

¹² In her lengthy and often trenchant monograph on the Iglesia ni Cristo, Julita Reyes Sancta Romana (1955:331) describes Mariano Ysagun and Bonifacia Manalo as 'a well-to-do couple based on the economic standards of those days'. But she fails to offer any evidence that might substantiate this statement. Almost all other writers I have consulted describe Felix Y. Manalo's family as one of very modest means.

up his own society of devoted followers. At first drawn to Colorumism – an odd assortment of tiny indigenous groups blending animism, nativism and Christianity that attracted restive Filipino peasants during the twilight years of Spanish rule – Manalo, in his quest for divine truth, even made secret visits to isolated religious hermitages on the slopes of Mount Banahao and Mount San Cristobal in southern Luzon.¹³ But he soon grew disenchanted with the confusing dogma, bizarre rites and deceitful seers of these secretive and idiosyncratic Colorum groups, and for some time remained without a secure religious mooring (Elesterio 1977:6-8; Crisostomo 1986:6-7).

Following a period of disillusionment and confusion, Manalo in 1900 apparently began to develop a keener sense of personal faith after attending an open debate in Manila between a Catholic priest and a Protestant minister. Intrigued by their impassioned dispute over conflicting interpretations of the Bible, he himself soon became a serious student of scripture and sought permanent fellowship among Protestants. In 1904 Manalo joined the Methodist Episcopal Church, attending Bible classes and serving as a volunteer worker. Still spiritually restless, he enrolled after a year in the Presbyterian's Ellinwood Bible Training School to pursue a formal religious education. A bit more than three years later (1908), Manalo joined the Christian Mission and for several years served as a popular lay preacher. During this time, he came to believe in the exclusive validity of baptism through immersion. Yet by 1911 Manalo had transferred once again, this time to Seventh Day Adventism. There Manalo laboured as trusted evangelist before quarrelling with Adventist leaders over matters of doctrine and customary authority relationships between Westerners and Filipinos. He was expelled in 1913.¹⁴ Plainly displeased with the various branches of Christianity brought to the Philippines by foreign missionaries, Manalo began to mingle with a diverse crowd of atheists and freethinkers who had rejected organized religion (Tuggy

¹³ The Colorums, which might be fairly portrayed as kaleidoscopically changing amalgams of folk traditions, spiritualism, hero-worship and selected elements of Catholicism, were born of harsh Hispanic rule and were sometimes associated with popular uprisings during the late Spanish and early American periods. These diminutive belief systems typically drew followers from a downtrodden peasantry. They often crystallized around individuals who vehemently opposed the foreign political and religious officialdoms seated in colonial Manila and sometimes harboured charlatans who claimed supernatural powers, frequently utilizing pilgrimages to sacred springs, mountain retreats or hidden caves to attract and socialize religious recruits (Agoncillo 1956:194-6; Constantino 1975:136, 350-6; Tuggy 1976:22-4; Iletto 1979: 93-7, 148-9, 205-6, 229-38, 255, 298-300).

¹⁴ Some writers argue that Manalo, whose first wife Tomasa Sereneo died after only a few years of marriage (c. 1909-12), was disciplined because he eloped in 1913 with Honorata de Guzman. When an Adventist missionary from America refused to bless their wedlock, they sought a Filipino minister of the Christian Mission to conduct the ceremony. Others claim his separation was prompted by a serious 'moral indiscretion' (Sancta Romana 1955:332-3; Tuggy 1976:30-3).

1976:21-35; Elesterio 1986:94-7). All the while, he was quietly pursuing scriptural studies on his own and closely examining the organizing principles of Catholicism and Protestantism.¹⁵

Felix Manalo reached a pivotal point in his personal religious odyssey during November 1913. After a three-day period of fasting and meditation, he concluded that the conflicting doctrines of various Christian groups could be resolved only through a fresh examination of the Bible from a non-Western perspective. Consequently Manalo proposed the formation of a new 'Church of Christ' seated in Asia that offered a culturally unbiased interpretation of scripture while also remaining outside the institutional jurisdiction of Europeans and Americans. To that end, he embarked on a programme of evening evangelism in Punta, Santa Ana (Manila), thereby launching the *Iglesia ni Cristo*. Within several months, Manalo had attracted a dozen people to his new indigenous Church (Plopino 1981:19-21; Crisostomo 1986:7-8). The INC was duly registered with the Philippine government on 27 July 1914 as a religious corporation, and by year's end it embraced around 100 converts.¹⁶

Throughout his lifetime, Manalo remained the consummate master of the *Iglesia ni Cristo*. For nearly 50 years, he functioned as its principal preacher, chief theologian, ranking executive and leading propagandist. Assisted by a handful of devoted advisors, Manalo served the INC as its ultimate authority in matters of pastoral education, missionary deployment, finances and real estate management, organizational design and political endorsements at election time. He even issued final approvals on architectural blueprints for individual houses of worship. Manalo's absolute control of the INC was in fact secured structurally and functionally by his presumed wisdom in all doctrinal issues, his high-profile public persona and his complete command of the ministerial and administrative staffs (Polotan 1965:92-3; Gumban 1968:43-5). In the shared consciousness and common parlance of Filipinos, Manalo reigned unchallenged as the Church's *Supremo*.

While a highly centralized bureaucracy and hierarchical pastoral organization were clearly important in guaranteeing Manalo's complete control of the *Iglesia ni Cristo*, his religious authority was ultimately legitimated for the faithful in 1922 when he assumed the mantle of God's last messenger on earth – the Sugo. This honorific implied a direct sanction from the Creator of the universe. In his singular capacity as a latter-day emissary of God, or the

¹⁵ During his spiritual journey from Colorumism to Adventism, Manalo held a variety of jobs (hatshop owner, barber, Bible salesman and photographer) in Manila and its suburbs along with his duties in various churches.

¹⁶ In his well-documented study of the INC, Tuggy (1976:50) put the Church membership at 100 persons late in 1914. Without offering any substantiating evidence, Sancta Romana (1955: 335), and Alonso (1968:44) assert that Manalo had converted more than 1,000 people by the end of that year.

'Angel of the East' to devotees, Manalo supposedly became the foremost Biblical authority for all humanity and the divinely designated leader of a re-established Church of Christ in the modern world. Furthermore, it was thought that this self-proclaimed Filipino Sugo fulfilled ancient prophecies set forth in Isaiah (41:9-14, 43:5-6, and 46:11-13), Revelation (7:1-3) and other biblical texts.¹⁷ Following Manalo's transformation into a contemporary prolocutor for God, his stature increased immeasurably among INC brethren and his position at the head of the Church became virtually unassailable.

With his firm hold on the Church officialdom and incredible prestige among the faithful, Felix Y. Manalo ran the Iglesia ni Cristo like an army in which he was commander-in-chief. Critical decisions regarding biblical truth derived exclusively from the Sugo. All financial affairs were supervised by his selected executive staff, all ministers received postings and garnered salaries from the national headquarters, and all sermons were prepared weekly and distributed to scattered congregations by the central authorities. The influence of the Sugo over his followers proved so pervasive that the INC was often termed the *Iglesia ni Manalo* and its adherents were called *Manalistas* by people of other faiths (Fabian 1969:7; Gumban 1968:42). It is noteworthy also that the Sugo was always described as a mesmerizing speaker who could deftly sway audiences through exhilarating oratory and persuasive argument. Moreover, both friends and foes portrayed him as an amiable man who appeared equally at ease with the Filipino elite, Manila's poor, important politicians and Westerners (Sanders 1969:355-6; Tuggy 1978:99-101). There is no doubt that Manalo managed these attributes and acquired abilities with consummate skill while transforming the Iglesia ni Cristo from a tiny religious organization into one of the most influential belief systems in the Philippines and while concurrently setting the stage for its ambitious international mission.

The Philippine mission: before and during World War II

Occasional reports to the contrary notwithstanding, the INC grew quite slowly during the first decade of its Philippine mission.¹⁸ Because of meagre human and financial resources, Manalo and his small cadre of newly

¹⁷ The idea of the Sugo is reviewed in Sancta Romana (1955:381-5), Gumban (1968:41), Fabian (1969:7-8), Sanders (1969:353-5) and Tuggy (1976:57-9, 116-9). Felix Manalo's critical role as God's last messenger on earth remains a key element of doctrinal discussion in Iglesia ni Cristo publications. For example, see Catañgay (1976, 1997), Aboloc (1980), Ledesma (1982), A. Meimban (1974, 1988b), Crisostomo (1997:10-1) and Iglesia ni Cristo (n.d.: 47-53).

¹⁸ In her biographical article on Felix Y. Manalo, Garcia (1964:182) asserts that 'the incipient Church' throughout its earliest years underwent 'rapid expansion' as 'followers multiplied' in

ordained ministers restricted their outreach to Manila and nearby provinces. In this difficult formative period, the tightly knit leadership of the Iglesia ni Cristo wisely avoided overextension of their evangelistic programme. They well realized that a secure religious beachhead in the densely populated realm enfolding Manila Bay remained critical to the long-term growth and territorial reach of the embryonic Filipino Church. This was also a time of frightening persecution by some Catholics, and of destructive internal strife within the INC. Ministers and members alike endured ridicule, intimidation and other indignities for their beliefs. Some even reported malicious beatings and stonings at the hands of angry neighbours in alignment with hostile strangers (A. Meimban 1981:12-13).¹⁹ The diminutive sect was further jeopardized in 1922 by the brief but serious 'Ora Rebellion', which culminated in the loss of several locales along with their church buildings in Bulacan and Nueva Ecija.²⁰ Despite the traumas of this formative period, by 1924 the Iglesia ni Cristo had enlisted an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 converts and organized 45 thriving local congregations in or near the national capital (Sancta Romana 1955:334-8; Tuggy 1976:44-59).

In 1925 the INC entered a period of expansion that continued unchecked until World War II. Ministers were systematically dispatched throughout the lowlands of Central and Southern Luzon, to extend the frontiers of established mission fields and to inaugurate pioneering religious crusades among nonbelievers in distant places. As the years wore on, the developing Church founded outposts in the Visayas (1937), expanded into Northern Luzon (1938), reached Mindoro (1940) and penetrated the Muslim realm of Mindanao (1941). By the onset of war, the Iglesia ni Cristo had secured footholds in

Manila and its immediate environs. But she neglects to marshal any evidence to support such an assertion. Even a thoughtful critic of the INC like Alonzo (1959:13) has curiously suggested a 'spectacularly high rate of conversion' before 1922.

¹⁹ Some INC writers contend that Manalo himself was repeatedly threatened by nonbelievers and periodically harassed by petty bureaucrats and elected government officials (A. Meimban 1982:18-9; Crisostomo 1986:8-9). At least one commentator claims that his tormentors occasionally attempted to poison him (Garcia 1964:182).

²⁰ Members of the Iglesia ni Cristo never use the word 'church' to denote geographically separate congregations, to describe sacred buildings or to delineate the international and all-inclusive Christian community as envisaged in the contemporary theology of ecumenism (Elesterio 1977:4-5). Since the genesis of the INC, the building utilized for routine worship and periodic communal gatherings of believers – regardless of its size, material, beauty, architectural form or location – has been termed a 'house of worship' or a *kapilya* (chapel). A single exception to this standardized practice is permitted in the case of the huge edifice that graces the grounds of the Iglesia ni Cristo headquarters complex in Quezon City: the magnificent 'Central Temple' (Bocobo 1984). In INC publications, the word 'Church' (without a named denomination and with the upper case C) refers specifically to the Iglesia ni Cristo as a proud and free-standing religious body. Even while subscribing to standard English parlance throughout this article, I will occasionally adopt descriptive terms preferred by the INC where such usage appears warranted.

strategic locations all over the Philippines yet embraced no more than 50,000 INC faithful.²¹

Though at least one contributor to *Pasugo* claims that the Iglesia ni Cristo 'grew steadily' from 1941-1945 (A. Meimban 1980:12), most writers suggest that the membership remained essentially stable during this period of Japanese rule (Elesterio 1977:18; Tuggy 1978:88). However all informed observers agree on one crucial point: the INC was unified in spirit and structure for the duration of the conflict. There is no doubt that the Sugo maintained firm control over the administrators, ministers and brethren of his still vulnerable Church throughout the difficult and lengthy period of conflict. In addition, he and his key counsellors began to design a sweeping national programme of proselytism for implementation immediately after reconquest by Filipino-American forces. This scheme for the systematic conversion of provincial peoples in far-flung towns and barrios was apparently inspired and informed by the multidirectional movement of refugees throughout in the Philippines during the war years.

By the summer of 1942, Felix Manalo came to realize that the internal migration of countless Filipinos, who were fleeing to family homes in the provinces rather than endure the harsh rule of surly Japanese troops stationed in Manila and other garrisoned cities, represented an opportunity in disguise for the Iglesia ni Cristo. He correctly understood that this wartime dispersal might function as an exceptional vehicle for future development of the Church, since it included many INC faithful who would willingly serve as carriers of the faith. During the darkest days of wartime occupation, the Sugo and his ministerial staff thus formulated a comprehensive plan for enlisting their now dispersed followers in a campaign to evangelize all sectors of the archipelago (Tuggy 1976:67-8, 87-9; Crisostomo 1986:10, 17). This expansive missionary effort commenced immediately after World War II.

The Philippine mission: the post-war years

During the past five decades, the proliferation of INC locales everywhere in the Philippines has been truly impressive. It is undeniable that the Iglesia ni Cristo had evolved into a major national church by the mid-1950s as its scattered brethren, who earlier had fled from insecure urban centres and areas of wartime conflict, became the seeds of new congregations in virtually every province. Missionary operations continue on all fronts even today, as ministers by the thousands are being trained at the College of Evangelical Ministry in Quezon City for deployment in rapidly expanding cities and in ever more

²¹ See footnote 3.

remote towns and villages throughout the country.²² Even without formal proselytizing, embryonic congregations frequently crystallize around a nucleus of isolated members or recent converts who organize prayer groups that meet on a regular basis even while lacking permanent *kapilya* and a resident clergy. Anchored and stabilized by this enduring programme of outreach and consolidation, the INC now spans the Philippines with more than 5,000 locales.²³

The dramatic nationwide diffusion of the Iglesia ni Cristo following World War II has been paralleled by an equally astonishing multiplication of believers. While only 88,125 people claimed alliance with the INC when interviewed by Filipino census enumerators in 1948, this total had grown to 270,104 registered adherents by 1960 and hence represented a remarkable upsurge of 306.5% in only twelve years (Bureau of the Census and Statistics 1971:14). The Philippine census of 1970, which was the last to include detailed data on religion at provincial and national levels, listed 475,407 men, women and children in the indigenous Church of Christ (National Census and Statistics Office 1974:476) for an impressive accretion of 176% in a single decade. Since that time the government has not gathered information on

²² The College of Evangelical Ministry was inaugurated in 1974 as the Ministerial Institute of Development and situated in the Quiapo district of Manila. When moved to a temporary location on Epifano de los Santos Avenue (EDSA) Quezon City in 1977, the school assumed a new name – the New Era Evangelical College. A year later it was shifted to the present campus of the INC officialdom in Quezon City, and soon renamed the Institute of Evangelical Ministry. Finally given its current appellation in 1995, the College of Evangelical Ministry presently has an enrolment of 4,500 ministerial students and five extension schools in Bulacan, Cavite, Laguna, Pampanga and Rizal provinces (Fuentes 1989, 1994b; Peña-Javier 1996; Pascual 1999; San Pedro 1999).

²³ In 1967, only four years after Felix Y. Manalo's death, there were about 2,200 INC locales in the Philippines (Sancta Romana 1967:15; Fabian 1969:9). According to one high-ranking Church official, the sum total of independent congregations had reached 2,584 by 1973 (Sandoval 1973: 2). This figure was echoed in both scholarly and popular writings over the next several years (Elisterio 1977:27, 53; Tuggy 1976:98), usually without comment on its decreasing validity since many new locales were being dedicated every month. Since then, the headquarters staff of the Iglesia ni Cristo has declined to provide comprehensive reports on the proliferation, distribution and total number of congregations. Nonetheless the editor-in-chief of *Pasugo* in the INC's 75th-anniversary edition observed that 2,088 locales had been established between 1963 and 1989 (Bienvenido Santiago 1989a:51-2). Several years later, in 1992, Rogelio C. Dumangas (1994: 24) claimed a total of '4,017 congregations all over the Philippine archipelago'. Additionally, the monthly *Pasugo* continues to publicly announce the dedication of each house of worship and the organization of new locales. With this information in hand, it may be safely suggested that the number of congregations in the Philippines now exceeds 5,000. The latter estimate pertaining to chartered INC locales is a bit higher than the nation's 'nearly 5,000' houses of worship noted in the earlier part of this article. Such a gap reflects a time lag in planning and constructing church buildings for existing congregations that are housed in temporary or inadequate quarters (Peña 1981). As long as the Iglesia ni Cristo continues to grow, one would anticipate a shortfall between the number of locales and church buildings.

religious affiliation.²⁴ In parallel fashion the Iglesia ni Cristo officialdom steadfastly refuses to divulge its aggregate annual statistics on the number of conversions, baptisms and believers. But reasonable estimates of the INC's membership and rate of increase – based on articles in *Pasugo*, items in the popular press, academic studies and government publications between 1948 and 1970 – are still possible and suggest a continuing pattern of rapid expansion.

Using growth rates validated by three Philippine censuses between 1948 and 1970, as well as the informed estimates of investigative reporters and other reliable writers, one may reasonably infer that the Iglesia ni Cristo today commands the loyalty of between 3,500,000 and 5,000,000 Filipinos. This said, it should still be noted that one popular journalist has reported a total of 14,000,000 INC members (Berbano 1982:9), while several others suggest a somewhat lower figure of 10,000,000 adherents (Fabian 1969:9; Trinidad 1970:52). Unfortunately, these grossly inflated figures were presented without any documentary support and consequently must be dismissed. More reliable and noteworthy are the occasional statements of INC leaders, who on several occasions during the past thirty years have claimed as many as 3,500,000 to 4,000,000 followers when detailing the accomplishments of their Church.²⁵ Such claims should not be taken lightly. In view of the INC's unremitting expansion during the 1980s and 1990s, the true figure today probably exceeds 5,000,000 adherents.

Doctrines and dynamics of expansion

During the past four decades, a number of Filipinos and Westerners have examined the teachings and institutional structure of the Iglesia ni Cristo to better understand the spiritual appeal of its intertwined dogma, code of conduct and social forms. Often associated with other religious institutions, such investigators are usually appalled by the aggressive assault of this oppor-

²⁴ The Philippines government offers no explanation for this glaring socio-cultural gap in almost all statistical handbooks, demographic publications, and national yearbooks released by the National Census and Statistics Office during the past three decades. Nevertheless, one may fairly surmise that the decision underlying the omission of religious data was made by either old guard politicians or entrenched bureaucrats who wish to camouflage the tremendous growth of the Iglesia ni Cristo at the expense of Catholicism and various Protestant organizations.

²⁵ The lower figure of 3,500,000 INC believers apparently derives from a statement made by Eraño G. Manalo during a press interview in 1963 (Caliwag 1963:22; Sanders 1969:353). This figure has been repeated in several commentaries on the Church of Christ (De Manila 1963:45; Sancta Romana 1967:14; Elwood 1968:49; Gumban 1968:43; Fabian 1969:9). Hirofumi Ando (1969:335) attributes the higher number of 4,000,000 followers to key officials in the 'INC hierarchy', but fails to offer substantiating references.

tunistic cult on long established Christian churches. Barely disguising their own sectarian biases, they sadly lament the steady loss of once loyal Catholics and Protestants to the INC and generally depict these converts as 'immature', 'ignorant', 'gullible' or 'poor' people who appear unable to resist the well crafted oratory and carefully honed theological arguments of dedicated INC ministers.²⁶ These always intractable and sometimes intolerant observers fail to realize, let alone admit, that the religious tenets, modes of worship and family support mechanisms of the Iglesia ni Cristo remain persuasive and emotionally satisfying for many sincere, self-confident and truly pious Filipinos who find little divine comfort in other forms of Christianity.

Other writers of a less biased or more scholarly bent, who fully comprehend the serious challenge of the INC to once well entrenched Philippine churches, occasionally design their critiques of the indigenous Church of Christ to highlight the purported character flaws, rumoured immoral conduct and deceptive Biblical interpretations of Felix Y. Manalo (Sancta Romana 1955:428-37; Alonzo 1959:8-10). Such commentators are especially offended by his denial of Christ's divinity, his corollary rejection of the essential Christian belief in an integral Trinity (God the Father, the son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit combined in a single Godhead), his self-proclaimed role as the Sugo and his claim that the Iglesia ni Cristo is the exclusive vehicle for salvation of humankind. Manalo, along with all ministers and members of the INC, have been further faulted for promoting their home-grown faith through blatant appeals to Filipino nationalism and for launching uncompromising attacks on other denominations from the pulpit, during religious assemblies, in the magazine *Pasugo* and through religious programming on radio and television (Sanders 1962:14-63; Tuggy 1976:105-39, 201-20). Despite continuing criticism of Manalo's conversion methods, fair and objective writers freely admit his success in disseminating INC beliefs, promoting high standards of personal conduct among followers, nurturing the leadership skills of key officials and building an enduring administrative structure for the new Church.

Scholars interested in the Iglesia ni Cristo agree that its binding creed is an amalgam of simple and straightforward religious principles, which together provide a secure and compelling spiritual anchor for the faithful. Although these components of faith and righteous behaviour are unequivocally dogmatic, and abhorrent to many Catholics and Protestants, the Church membership is convinced that they embody eternal scriptural truths. The core canon insists on the infallibility of the Bible together with its definitive interpretation by well trained and properly anointed INC ministers, proclaims an omnipotent and unitary God while denying the idea of Trinitari-

²⁶ For a sampling of such disparaging remarks about INC converts, see Kavanagh (1955:26-7), Sobrepeña (1964:25-6), Gumban (1968:41, 45-6) and Guanzon (1977:136-8).

anism, defines the role of Jesus as a mediator between the Creator and humanity but not an essential deity vital to human salvation, demands baptism of adults through immersion, and heralds the emergence of the Iglesia ni Cristo in the 20th century in Southeast Asia as the preordained and singular Church of Christ (Bienvenido Santiago 1986, 1988; Iglesia ni Cristo, n.d.). These basic beliefs are considered divinely inspired and therefore beyond dispute. All believers must subscribe unhesitatingly to the entire set of INC doctrines or face immediate separation from the Church (Alonzo 1959:23-4; Sanders 1969:361-2).

While dogma serves to order and validate the religious behaviour of INC brethren, a number of organizational factors are equally important in enhancing the charismatic authority of leaders, facilitating hierarchical governance, and promoting growth. Firstly, all ministers receive a rigorous and standardized education leavened by detailed instruction in Biblical interpretation at the College of Evangelical Ministry. This is meant to impress potential converts, teach new members and confound opponents through a single and uncompromising version of Christianity. Trained also in the complementary arts of rhetoric and debate, the ministers are well prepared to promote their faith before sceptical or hostile audiences, as well as to systematically promote defections from the Church of Rome. Secondly, the Iglesia ni Cristo is a proudly independent belief system that remains free of external control by Western religious authorities. Its prevailing national character evidently bolsters patriotic impulses and fosters ethnic pride among many Filipino adherents, who point with disgust at the foreign ecclesiastical supervision of the Catholic Church and other Christian organizations in the Philippines. Thirdly, the INC is highly centralized, which ensures the easy management of locales and mobilization of followers for communal outreach projects and informal evangelism among nonbelievers. Fourthly, both ministers and communicants are committed to high standards of personal discipline and immutable routines of worship. All brethren are urged to attend Sunday and Thursday worship services. They must tithe, they cannot marry outside the faith and they are advised to live modestly as law-abiding citizens in a secular world. Recalcitrant individuals commonly endure shunning or even expulsion. These social and religious obligations, individually and collectively, constitute an enduring socio-religious contract for the membership of the Iglesia ni Cristo. The legitimacy of this group covenant, of course, remains firmly grounded in pronouncements by the Sugo, whose legacy as the Creator's 'Last Messenger' on earth continues to fascinate the general Filipino populace.²⁷ No

²⁷ Among the best discussions concerning the institutional structure of the Iglesia ni Cristo, its ministerial organization and prescribed conduct of members are Sancta Romana (1955:340-80), Alonzo (1959:16-36), Sanders (1962:9-77, 1969:355-65) and Tuggy (1976:141-200).

other modern religion in the Philippines, and only a few in the world for that matter, unabashedly declares that the authority of its oracle was directly sanctioned by God less than a century ago.

Transition and growth under Eraño G. Manalo

Although the INC arose as a potent religious force in the Philippines during the 1950s, the next decade proved to be a time of perceived crises, diverse challenges and institutional changes born of extraordinary growth. These included the death of the Sugo, the quick appointment of his son Eraño G. Manalo as the Church's commanding Executive Minister, an increasing involvement of the Iglesia ni Cristo within the complex realm of Filipino politics, the amazing augmentation of its financial resources and church properties, a continuing proliferation of congregations throughout the archipelago, and the inauguration of a far-reaching overseas mission.

At the time of Felix Y. Manalo's death on 12 April 1963, certain pundits suggested that the Church of Christ would gradually vanish from the Philippine scene in the absence of its all-powerful founder. Others predicted immediate dissolution through irreparable schism (Garcia 1964:183; Sanders 1969:362). In point of fact, the Sugo seemed almost synonymous with the INC in the public mind. Because he functioned on the national stage as the creative genius, pre-eminent evangelist and chief publicity agent of the Iglesia ni Cristo, Manalo enjoyed near celebrity status among Filipinos with access to daily newspapers, weekly magazines and the broadcast media. To believers he was the beloved and divinely commissioned Sugo, whose charisma infused and enveloped the INC. Consequently, Manalo's funeral attracted an estimated 2,000,000 public mourners and generated conspicuous grief among his family members and close advisors (Elesterio 1977:13-4). Yet the death of the INC founder failed to destabilize the Church officialdom. Indeed, key administrators appeared well prepared for the inevitable succession of authority to a new leader.

Following a confirmation process endorsed a decade earlier by Felix Manalo, his son Eraño G. Manalo was elected to the top post of the Iglesia ni Cristo by its Council of Ministers only two weeks after the Sugo's death. The newly named Executive Minister in turn selected two ranking officials from

²⁸ The foremost of Eraño G. Manalo's advisors were Teofilo C. Ramos (General Evangelist) and Cipriano P. Sandoval (Administrative Secretary). Together they counseled the younger Manalo on ministerial issues and organizational management (Elesterio 1977:24-6). Benjamin J. Santiago, Sr., who edited *Pasugo* for nearly two decades and supervised the locales of Metro Manila, was also quite influential in the central officialdom (A. Meimban 1988a).

this consultative committee as ministerial and operational advisers.²⁸ He then launched a whirlwind tour of the Philippines which was highlighted by worship services designed to revive the spirit of still sorrowful INC congregations. He paid informal visits to the homes of ordinary followers, held immense evangelistic meetings that guaranteed continuing coverage in the provincial and national press, made courtesy calls to key regional politicians, and met with Division Ministers to discuss regional concerns and relations with the Central Office of the Church of Christ.²⁹ A lawyer by training, and already an experienced Church officer with service as the circulation manager of *Pasugo* and general treasurer of the INC, Eraño Manalo easily assumed his father's mantle of authority in the course of this countrywide visitation. Displaying the characteristics of an able supervisor and thoughtful visionary, he immediately took charge of the Church's managerial apparatus and began to formulate plans for ambitious missionary enterprises within and beyond the Philippines (Tuggy 1976:91, 146-55; Elesterio 1977:25-6, 141-3).

Confounding many critics, Eraño G. Manalo soon displayed the distinctive qualities of a charismatic preacher. He also proved to be an exceptionally skilled administrator. In fact his stewardship of the INC has been marked by assertive spiritual leadership, systematic religious outreach and essential operational innovations. Recognizing the need for periodic institutional modifications to serve an ever increasing membership, the younger Manalo has modernized the governmental system of the Iglesia ni Cristo and constructed an impressive headquarters in Quezon City to house the Central Office with its large bureaucracy (Fuentes 1986). He has reorganized the regional subdivisions of the INC to better reflect the political geography and population distribution of the Philippines (Bocobo 1989a; Sarmiento and Bocobo 1989), encouraged the development of New Era University (formerly New Era College) to provide INC youth with accredited undergraduate and graduate degree programmes in a wide range of disciplines and professions,³⁰ founded the College of Evangelical Ministry to supply sufficient min-

²⁹ Formerly termed 'Division Ministers', today's 'Supervising Ministers' are responsible for both administrative and ministerial work in outlying regional units of the INC. These 'ecclesiastical districts', or 'divisions' before 1990, generally embrace between 30 and 120 locales and are comprised of a single Philippine province. The larger and more densely settled provinces, however, are often subdivided into several districts (Tuggy 1976:152-3; Bocobo 1989a; Sarmiento and Bocobo 1989). The 'Central Office' refers to the functional headquarters of the Iglesia ni Cristo, where the Executive Minister, his ministerial and administrative assistants and the Church's operational bureaucracy are quartered. After repeated moves between 1915 and 1971 to ever larger office structures, it is presently housed in a splendid building near the University of the Philippines in Quezon City (Fuentes 1986).

³⁰ Established in 1975 as the New Era Educational Institute and located in Manila's crowded downtown area of Quiapo, the present New Era University was conceived by the officialdom of the Iglesia ni Cristo as a private, nonprofit and nonsectarian secondary school. In 1978, by incor-

isterial staffs for the Philippines and missionaries for a world outreach,³¹ supervised the modernization of radio and television facilities operated by the Iglesia ni Cristo to serve a dispersed national community of faith and to attract converts,³² ordained more than 5,000 new ministers and countless lay workers to guarantee continuing development of the Church of Christ,³³ and fostered a complex programme of church construction that touches the consciousness of virtually all Filipinos. In other words, Eraño G. Manalo's has compiled a remarkable record during his nearly four decades of service as Executive Minister of the INC. While offering inspired religious guidance for a widely dispersed membership, the younger Manalo is also attempting to construct an administrative and educational infrastructure that will effectively undergird future expansion of the Iglesia ni Cristo at home and abroad.

porating the older New Era Training Center with its full range of technical and vocational courses, it became a center of higher learning: the New Era College. Transferred during the same year to temporary quarters in the EVCO building near the Central Office of the INC, the College evolved rapidly through a proliferation of academic offerings and increasing student enrolment. In 1986, it moved yet again into a sprawling permanent facility on St Joseph Street in Quezon City. Reconstituted as a university on 30 June 1995, the institution now embraces thousands of students and offers more than 20 undergraduate degree options, several graduate programs and certain non-degree training classes. It also serves younger children from nursery school and kindergarten through primary, intermediate and secondary levels of pre-collegiate education (Vallejos 1986; Cabilangan 1989; Tiosen 1995).

³¹ See footnote 22.

³² Church officials fully recognize the utility of the broadcast media as an instrument of religious integration for its widely scattered membership and a vehicle of outreach to potential converts. Indeed, publications of the Iglesia ni Cristo often carry feature articles that detail the role of radio and television in both national and world missions of the Iglesia ni Cristo. In like manner, the monthly *Pasugo* regularly lists its religious programming in various languages for radio and TV stations throughout the Philippines and abroad (Fuentes 1984, 2000; Sarmiento 1985; Paran 1989; Benildo Santiago 1989; Vallejos 1994; Barrientos 1997).

³³ The leadership of the Iglesia ni Cristo remains unwilling to release detailed data on the number of INC ministers and their various appointments as heads of congregations, religious educators, missionaries or administrators in the Church headquarters or the offices of ecclesiastical districts. In the past, scholars have garnered some data from the National Library of the Philippines, which maintains a registry of Catholic priests, Protestant pastors and other religious clerics who are authorized to solemnize Filipino marriages (Elesterio 1977:156-65; Rodriguez 1984). Unfortunately, these listings are seldom up-to-date. It is still possible to roughly calculate a running total of ministers by surveying key Church publications that report on ordination ceremonies and often list new ministers. Accordingly, we know that an average of 116 INC clergymen were ordained annually between 1963 and 1989 (Bienvenido Santiago 1989b:52-3; Dumangas 1994:24), that in recent years the number of newly invested preachers has sometimes exceeded 200 (Bocobo 1991:34) and that the College of Evangelical Ministry presently accommodates about 4,500 registered students (San Pedro 1999:7). At the same time, Eraño G. Manalo personally presided over the ordination of 3,700 individuals between 1977 and 1993 (A. Meimban 1993:115), and so has likely invested more than 5,000 ministers during his tenure as Executive Minister.

Landscape as testimony

Though renowned for awe-inspiring sacred structures that dominate urban and rural skylines throughout the Philippines, the Iglesia ni Cristo has also indirectly shaped the nation's cultural landscape through a variety of social welfare programmes. Firstly, its Barrio Maligaya, which was founded in the 1960s during a period of labour unrest on Tarlac's sugar plantations, is viewed by some as a model land reform project. Situated on a 600-hectare estate in Nueva Ecija, this experiment in group farming emerged as a refuge for INC followers who had suffered persecution because of their religious opposition to unionization. Once badly deforested, Maligaya is today a prosperous agricultural colony of thriving orchards, rice fields, a large piggery and food processing facilities. A well-ordered settlement made up of private homes, a school, recreational facilities, a medical station and the typical INC *kapilya* forms the nucleus of this communal undertaking and continues to impress latter-day reformers (Deats 1967; Rosquites 1969b). Secondly, the construction of INC chapels sometimes triggers a corollary growth of adjacent 'residential compounds' occupied by members. Such clusters often evolve as informal affairs that represent a spontaneous desire of individuals to associate with co-religionists. Or they may be planned housing developments on Church properties for ministers, missionaries, administrative staff and ordinary believers. While not a nationwide phenomenon, these distinctive communities still represent an interesting example of socio-religious quarterization (Tuggy 1976:176-8). Thirdly, the Iglesia ni Cristo continues to impact society through a well-funded Department of Social Services that directly assists needy brethren (Tiosen 1986). It also supports a system of clinics for members, sponsors medical missions for all Filipinos, provides quick response relief teams for disaster victims (Bocobo 1989b:137-8), and campaigns against the consumption of alcohol, drugs and tobacco (Ilan 1998; Rodas 2000). Fourthly, the Church of Christ underwrites an effective family planning programme that endorses the use of contraceptives by couples upon the advice of physicians (Bienvenido Santiago 1992; Tiosen 1996). This effort has helped reduce the size of INC households in a still conservative Catholic country with one of the world's higher rates of population growth and a heritage that celebrates large families (Population Reference Bureau 1999). Finally, the Church uses its publications for the ongoing environmental education of followers and promotes weekend tree-planting enterprises by provincial locales (Fuentes 1994a). These initiatives have enhanced the well-being of dutiful members along with many other Filipinos. The Iglesia ni Cristo has thus impacted society and the landscape through the creation of a workable strategy for land reform, the proliferation of INC-funded housing projects, the implementation of public health programmes targeted for the

poor, the sponsorship of family planning efforts to stabilize the national population, and the initiation of national conservation enterprises and regional reforestation schemes designed to preserve and restore the Philippine environment. But the Church's most indelible imprint is in the form of unique and stately religious buildings.

In 1971 the Iglesia ni Cristo proudly proclaimed its nationwide emergence as the second largest belief system in the Philippines by dedicating an imposing Central Office building at the corner of Central and Commonwealth Avenues, Diliman, Quezon City. Situated near the University of the Philippines, this was the first of several magnificent structures that now highlight the sacred landscape of a sprawling and increasingly impressive INC headquarters complex. Fashioned to serve a rapidly growing and broadly scattered membership, the palatial and futuristic office building accommodates a large bureaucracy composed of the Church's governing Economic Council, dedicated mid-level managers and well-trained secretarial personnel who operate a tightly organized administrative system by means of a first-rate computer and communications infrastructure (Crisostomo 1997:13). Fifteen years later, a second edifice – the truly majestic Central Temple – was added to the emerging 'City of Faith'. Massive in external form, with soaring spires, distinctive octagonal towers, fine latticework, and ribbed fenestrations this huge house of worship can hold some 7,000 believers.³⁴ Its elegant interior features massive chandeliers, exquisitely ornate woodwork, and other lavish decorations while remaining a highly functional place of worship for men, women and children (Marcoleta 1986). A third architectural gem in the sprawling INC enclosure was inaugurated in 1989: the grand Tabernacle. Conceived as a multipurpose facility, this unique tent-like structure sits adjacent to the Central Temple and will accommodate around 4,000 people (Vallejos 1989). In addition to these three grand buildings, the still evolving City of Faith also embraces the College of Evangelical Ministry and New Era University, a gymnasium and sports complex, dormitories, parks and gardens, a modern general hospital and residential compounds for the Executive Minister together with other ranking ministerial and administrative officers (Crisostomo 1997:13).

While the Central Temple and Central Office are among Metro Manila's foremost landmarks, the Philippine cultural landscape is even more ineffaceably marked by several hundred monumental INC *kapilya* that tower over

³⁴ The Central Temple seats approximately 3,000 people in the main hall (nave, balcony, choir loft and nursery), while another 1,900 worshippers can be accommodated in its two side chapels. Additionally, the ground floor sanctuary will hold an overflow crowd of almost 2,000 faithful. It is connected to the main hall by video circuit and has a gigantic baptism pool that is designed for the concurrent immersion of about 600 men and women (Marcoleta 1986:52-3).

the religious structures of other faiths in the nation's major urban areas, as well as some 5,000 smaller houses of worship in provincial cities, towns and barrios throughout the archipelago. In recent decades, the Iglesia ni Cristo has indeed continued to validate its religious message and national influence by constructing scores of religious structures to accommodate an expanding membership. Between 1963 and 1989, the first twenty-six years of Eraño G. Manalo's tenure as Executive Minister, the INC dedicated an annual average of 45 churches (Bienvenido Santiago 1989a:51). During the past decade, the total increased to around 75 new houses of worship each year.³⁵ The subject of much discussion and grudging admiration among Filipinos of other faiths, these distinctive *kapilya* clearly proclaim the continuing appeal of Felix Y. Manalo's message and the resultant expansion of the INC.

Certainly scores and probably hundreds of writers have testified to the beauty, structural mass, stunning visual impact and singular architectural form of churches built by the INC. Many comment also on the enormous costs of construction and high standards of maintenance (Kavanagh 1955:28; Sancta Romana 1967:15). The following statements extracted from popular and scholarly publications are fairly typical. The journalist R.V. Asis contends that the INC house of worship in San Juan makes the Roman Catholic cathedral in Intramuros (Manila) look like 'a cheap, ungainly house of devotion in spite of its beauty and worth in cement and marble' (Sanders 1969:352). Fernando Nakpil-Zialcita (1978:2728) declares that the INC *kapilya* may be readily identified through 'its exuberant use of fanciful forms and ornaments [...and a] brilliant white facade whose silhouette is a cusped Gothic arch or a flattened Saracenic arch'. According to the architect George S. Salvan (1986: 758), the religious edifices of the INC are built in 'a highly original style, bristling with spires and cantilevered canopies [...that] has altered the skyline of the Philippines from North to South'. A political scientist, Hirofumi Ando (1969:336), states that churches constructed by the Iglesia ni Cristo are always 'expensive and resplendent' and usually appear 'impressive and overpowering, even to' the nonbeliever. The opening paragraph in Tuggy's (1976:1) comprehensive book on INC doctrine and development clearly portrays the place of the *kapilya* in the environs of Metro Manila:

Looking from a jet-liner's window, taking off over the city of Manila, gracefully tall office buildings along Ayala Avenue in Makati contrast with hundreds of [...squatter] shacks built along the canals and waterways of this tropical metro-

³⁵ This number is extrapolated from various INC publications. It is indeed noteworthy that almost every monthly issue of *Pasugo* includes short notices on or photographs of recently dedicated *kapilya*. Additionally, this widely circulated magazine periodically presents feature articles on the construction of individual houses of worship and lengthy commentaries concerning the role of sacred edifices as vehicles for glorifying God (Silvestre 1969; Salazar 1971).

polis. Scattered over the spreading city, sharply spired, distinctively designed, cathedrals rise above most buildings and dominate the Manila skyline. These are the 'chapels' of the rapidly growing Iglesia ni Cristo.

The INC house of worship – marked by its splendid arches, great canopies, delicate lines, pastel colours, lofty towers, and soaring spires that direct one's gaze skyward – has therefore deeply impacted the Philippine landscape.³⁶

Some critics of the Iglesia ni Cristo vociferously decry the ongoing proliferation of *kapilya*, feeling that the monetary costs are far too burdensome for poorer families within the Church (Sanders 1962:66; Tuggy 1976:178-80). Indeed, the INC officialdom readily admits that tremendous resources are expended for the purchase of building tracts and on construction expenses. The Engineering and Construction Department of the INC, which employs a substantial permanent force of architects, surveyors, engineers, draftsmen, carpenters and masons, as well as thousands of non-skilled workers, is in fact an extremely complex organization that designs and builds several hundred *kapilya*, parsonages, church schools and other structures of various sizes and materials each year. At the same time, its staff annually supervises scores of renovation projects on older houses of worship. Most of the new religious buildings, which represent variations on an architectural plan originally articulated by Carlos Santos-Viola, the brother-in-law of the famed Filipino architect Juan Nakpil (Nakpil-Zialcita 1978; Salvan 1986), are designed to accommodate between 250 and 1,000 people. However, the grand churches situated in Metro Manila and major provincial cities will usually seat between 1,000 and 3,000 worshippers. There is little doubt that the INC must budget millions of pesos each year to build and maintain such structures.³⁷

Despite the enormous financial burden, leaders and members of the Iglesia ni Cristo continue to work in tandem to support their ambitious programme of church construction and improvement. This joint effort is firmly rooted in a conviction that the visually impressive, solidly built, and well maintained houses of worship clearly testify to INC growth and serve as an enduring witness to the individual and collective faith of its brethren. Towering over the sanctuaries of all other belief systems in the Philippines, the architecturally unique *kapilyas* not only help nurture the spirit of loyal members but also attract converts to this indigenous religious community.

³⁶ It is curious that Winand Klassen (1986) in his otherwise encyclopedic work on the architectural history of the Philippines failed to offer even passing commentary on the ubiquity of the INC *kapilya* in the nation's cultural landscape.

³⁷ For short but informative commentaries on the organization and accomplishments of the INC's Engineering and Construction Department, consult Peña (1981), Bocobo (1986), and Sison (1986).

An exploratory mission in the 'Far West'

During the mid-1960s, even while consolidating his authority as Executive Minister and laying the foundations for intensified INC proselytizing in the Philippines, Eraño G. Manalo prepared to inaugurate an incredibly ambitious mission in the 'Far West'.³⁸ The idea for such worldwide outreach was apparently considered by his father as early as 1948, when the 'Articles of Incorporation' of the Iglesia ni Cristo were amended to allow for propagation abroad.³⁹ By 1963, the Church leadership had confirmed the existence of its first foreign outpost: a tiny group of INC members in Guam that emerged unexpectedly without formative support from the Manila officialdom. Initiated three years earlier by seven Filipinos who served as contract workers for the United States Navy, this gathering of brethren originally met in public halls or members' homes and used tape-recorded sermons from the Philippines upon which to base their worship services (Estavillo 1994). The Guam group was finally recognized by the Central Office, assigned a resident minister and transformed into a locale in 1969.

Still the spontaneous crystallization of one diminutive INC congregation in Guam did not prove sufficient to trigger an international religious crusade by the Church of Christ. What did initially drive the overseas venture of the Iglesia ni Cristo was the U.S. Immigration Act of 1965. This law, which guaranteed a significant increase in the quota of non-European migrants, soon permitted Filipinos by the tens of thousands to settle annually in the United States.⁴⁰ Ranking officials of the INC correctly realized that these immigrants, along with many expatriates from the Philippines who lived in North Amer-

³⁸ In INC literature, the term 'Far West' is used to depict the Church's mission field in the Western World. It apparently derives from a curious interpretation of Christian prophecy which portrays Felix Y. Manalo as the 'Angel from the East' (Revelation 7:1-3) who reestablished the authentic Church of Christ (Iglesia ni Cristo) in the Philippines, or the 'Far East' (Isaiah 59:19), following centuries of turmoil in Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Christian groups. From there, Christ's latter-day Church is dispatching missionaries to gather lost souls in the 'Far West' (Isaiah 43:5). This rendering of the foregoing Biblical passages has been repeatedly set forth in *Pasugo* and other INC publications over the years (Abaloc 1973; Catañgay 1976, 1986, 1997; Fuentes 1993; Rosquites 1993; A. Meimban 1998).

³⁹ Reprinted in Elesterio (1977:130), Article 2 of the 'Amended Articles of Incorporation of the IGLESIA NI CRISTO' (1 April 1948) reads: 'This religious corporation has for her object the propagation of the pure and undefiled Doctrines and Teachings of the Gospel of Christ in the Philippines and in other places which may be reached by her Ministers and members.' Italics added.

⁴⁰ If present demographic trends continue, Filipinos will soon rank first among the various groups of Asians who have settled in the United States. For more information on their patterns of migration and commentary on the Filipino-American experience, see Lasker (1931), Buaken (1948), Bulosan (1943), McWilliams (1964), Dorita (1975), Alcantara (1981), Teodoro (1981), Cordova (1983), Domingo (1983), R. Anderson (1984), Pido (1985) and Vallangca (1987).

ica, provided fertile ground for launching their contemplated worldwide enterprise.

Interestingly the younger Manalo faced circumstances in the Far West similar to those encountered by his father in the Philippines immediately after World War II. It will be recalled that the Sugo rightly assumed that the throngs of refugees who fled to outlying provinces from wartime Manila and other cities included many INC members who might be easily enlisted as local evangelists. In like fashion, his son plainly believed that the international outreach of the Church of Christ could be directly coupled to an overseas presence of several million permanent settlers and temporary residents from the Philippines. He was correct. Though predominantly Catholic, with growing Protestant minorities, most communities in the Filipino diaspora embraced numerous members of the Iglesia ni Cristo who were anxious to organize prayer groups and serve as uncommissioned missionaries.

Eraño G. Manalo fittingly launched the foreign religious campaign of the Iglesia ni Cristo on 24 July 1968, the Church's 54th anniversary, and so began a religious campaign that continues to the present day. During a three-week visit to the United States (Hawaii, California and New York), he and his small delegation of INC leaders assessed the potential for Iglesia ni Cristo evangelism within the Filipino diaspora and assisted in the missionary process through instructive sermons, spiritual counsel, administrative directions, advice on the legal registration of religious corporations with secular authorities, and the dedication of two American locales (Ewa, Hawaii and Mountain View, California). Several senior members of this pioneering group – Pedro R. Meimban II and Cipriano P. Sandoval – remained behind in Hawaii and California respectively as the first resident ministers assigned to congregations outside the Philippines (Rosquites 1969a). A second, and equally important, accomplishment of Manalo's delegation involved the delineation of a diagnostic procedure for defining and opening a mission field.

Before the arrival of the Executive Minister and his associates, the Filipino-Americans of Ewa (a plantation town northwest of Honolulu) had nurtured their faith for over three years by worshipping together in private homes, listening to taped sermons from the Philippines, studying religious tracts published by the Iglesia ni Cristo, extracting devotional advice from letters sent by distant relatives and friends in their homeland, and searching the pages of *Pasugo* for spiritual inspiration. Yet these INC faithful ardently yearned for their own locale and frequently expressed these desires through direct appeals to the Church headquarters in Quezon City. They hoped to demonstrate their readiness for transformation into a fully constituted locale during Manalo's brief visitation.

Immediately after reaching Honolulu on 27 July, the Executive Minister and his colleagues began a rapid evaluation of the Ewa prayer group to see

whether it was ready for elevated standing as an officially designated congregation. They conducted worship services in a private home, evaluated budding INC leaders among the Hawaiian brethren, offered advice on religious and administrative matters, estimated the number of former brethren in the area who had drifted away from the Iglesia ni Cristo during the migration process yet who might regain their faith, and contemplated the immediate posting of an ordained Iglesia ni Cristo minister in Ewa. Their mere presence seemed to energize the core devotees in this thriving prayer group, which was comprised of honest, industrious and sincere Ilocano labourers who worked in nearby sugar fields and were enthusiastic in their collective worship. Obviously impressed, Eraño Manalo formally proclaimed the Ewa community a full-fledged INC locale on 28 July (Rosquites 1969a:10-2; Bocobo 1983:11-2). The following day, his delegation left for the American mainland to carry out equivalent visitations in San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York City.

Long before his pioneering undertaking in the United States, Eraño Manalo had been astounded by the many private letters and petitions he had received from members of the INC prayer group in Ewa calling for their reconstitution as an independent congregation. Already inclined towards a positive response, he acted quickly after witnessing the collective spiritual dynamic, group solidarity and organizational preparedness of the Hawaiian brethren (A. Meimban 1998:6-7). But Manalo fully realized that geographical conditions in the continental United States were markedly different from those in Hawaii. While the human and spiritual ingredients for flourishing missions might be similar, the distances between individual INC families tended to be much greater in most mainland American states. In short, he recognized the potential difficulties in assembling worshippers, finding lost brethren,⁴¹ siting *kapilyas*, guaranteeing routine attendance at worship services and organizing communal welfare activities when INC members and likely Filipino-American converts were scattered over sprawling metropolitan regions in states such as New York and Texas, widely separated in secondary cities like those in Florida and Washington, or isolated on farms as in the Central Valley of California (Rosquites 1969a:12-4).

Despite lingering reservations about the immediate viability of mainland locales, the Executive Minister remained open-minded during his visitations in California and New York between 29 July and 18 August. He was graciously welcomed everywhere by INC members and heartened by their

⁴¹ Recurring in *Pasugo* and other INC publications, the term 'lost brethren' is full of meaning for ministers and members of the Iglesia ni Cristo. It depicts former members who live far beyond the geographic reach of an established locale, are not affiliated with a prayer group or have slipped from their religious moorings (Bocobo 1983).

undeniable commitment to the Church. Though deeply touched by emotional requests for new congregations and direct ministerial guidance, Manalo remained quite concerned about the extreme dispersal of emerging prayer groups, lost brethren and Filipino immigrants in the vast urban areas of Los Angeles and New York. In the San Francisco Bay Area, however, conditions seemed more promising. Local INC organizers there had been conducting informal devotional meetings for over two years and proved able to gather a large crowd for worship services during the Executive Minister's visitation. Inspired and impressed, Manalo soon decided to formally establish a locale for the Bay Area in the city of Mountain View and then summoned Cipriano P. Sandoval from Honolulu to serve as the pioneering resident minister (Rosquites 1969a:13-4; Bocobo 1983:14-5).

Without much ado during their American mission, the new Executive Minister and his key lieutenants had conceived a straightforward programme for conducting missionary outreach from the Philippines to regions where Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam and Buddhism had reigned supreme for centuries or even millennia. This programme involves an integrated strategy of revival, evangelism; institutional development and tight administrative control. The first step in INC proselytizing usually hinges on religious revival among Filipino immigrants already schooled in the dogma and social mores propounded by the *Iglesia ni Cristo*. The leadership thus seeks to discover, register and incorporate all nascent prayer groups in lands outside the Philippines. In places where Filipino migrants are especially numerous, the Church also endeavours to identify all former members who seem likely to renew their sacred covenant with the Church of Christ by joining these informal devotional gatherings. Despite expired memberships, lapses of faith and sheer distance from functioning assemblages of believers, many lost brethren still long for the spiritual nurturing and promised salvation of a caring INC community. When identified, they generally return to the Church's fold. With organizational and doctrinal assistance from INC officialdom, participants in the emergent committee prayer groups frequently take a second step in expanding their religious communities by making evangelistic overtures to Filipino friends in both Catholic and Protestant Churches. A third step in the mission process entails growth through the obligatory conversion of prospective spouses who subscribe to different belief systems. Since members are forbidden to marry outside the *Iglesia ni Cristo* (Aboloc 1973; Catañgay 1975), they have little choice but to persuade future marriage partners of other faiths to join the INC. Such recruitment is in fact generating a steady stream of Filipino converts from throughout the diaspora and of non-Filipinos from various host societies. In a threefold final step that continues to yield viable locales, the Central Office establishes theological and administrative order in its worldwide Church by means of a com-

prehensive system of ministerial training and supervision, complete managerial control of INC personnel and properties and periodic on-site visits to individual congregations by supervisors from district offices or officials from the Philippines. In like manner, through its multifaceted outreach, the leadership in Quezon City is successfully preserving its absolute command of an increasingly internationalized Iglesia ni Cristo.

In the course of Eraño Manalo's exploratory American mission, the Iglesia ni Cristo officialdom learned five key lessons. Firstly, many INC immigrants, contract labourers and other expatriates who comprise the Filipino diaspora remain true to their religious beliefs even when disconnected from a supportive community of worshippers. Their spiritual strength is nurtured through readings in *Pasugo*, taped sermons from home and helpful communications from loved ones in the Philippines. Secondly, some believers actively seek out other Filipinos who share their faith, and organize group devotions. Thirdly, the resultant prayer groups generally proclaim their existence through letters and appeals for ministerial and organizational assistance from the Central Office. Such communications help to define the most promising areas for missionary work abroad. Fourthly, the viability of informal INC gatherings as future locales can best be measured during site visits by Church officials, which include consultations with lay leaders to gauge their level of commitment, worship services to confirm the likely complement of local members, and general discussions on the number of lost brethren nearby who are likely to reconvert. Finally, the Manalo delegation proved the need for a well-trained missionary corps and an enduring institutional infrastructure through which to extend and manage its enterprise in the Far West.

Filipino diaspora: A worldwide infrastructure for the INC mission

At the dawn of the 21st century, Iglesia ni Cristo missionaries are actively at work in more than 70 nations where people from the Philippines have clustered as immigrants or contract workers. When such localized aggregations of overseas Filipinos reach demographic thresholds of several thousand people, it is common for some INC members in their midst to start ferreting out fellow believers and lost brethren who might be drawn into prayer groups. Likewise, these diffuse communities of Filipino settlers and sojourners constitute potentially fruitful mission fields where disenchanted individuals belonging to other faiths can be led to a spiritual rebirth in the Church of Christ. This includes many who suffer the pangs of social uncertainty in their newly adopted countries, some who are experiencing difficulties in the acculturation process, and others who have failed to find comfort in local Catholic parishes or Protestant churches dominated by non-Filipino staffs and mem-

berships. In addition, such persons are often painfully lonesome for relatives and friends in the Philippines (Reed 1990:168-70). Because of these socio-religious conditions, the Filipino diaspora clearly offers myriad opportunities for proselytism among displaced people who remain without a spiritual anchor, long for heart-warming friendships and are thus susceptible to the overtures of determined preachers and kindly members of the Iglesia ni Cristo.

Even while growing steadily through recovery of lost brethren, endless appeals to nonbelievers, and spousal conversions, the Church's foreign mission has been firmly anchored over the past three decades by the loyalty of ordinary INC members who retained their religious convictions during the migration process. But their faith alone is probably insufficient to sustain this thriving international venture. Recent and continuing overseas expansion of the Iglesia ni Cristo ultimately derives from the collective vision of Eraño G. Manalo and his top lieutenants, who have provided sufficient start-up funding to construct a solid organizational foundation for their overseas enterprise, established a first-rate training institute for missionaries destined to serve in the Filipino diaspora, fashioned an administrative system that guarantees efficient and flexible management, and utilized *Pasugo*, other INC publications and the electronic media (TV, radio, e-mail and the Internet) to propagate the faith and implement integrative programmes of doctrinal education.

From the beginning, ranking officials of the Iglesia ni Cristo realized that their international enterprise would require substantial financial support from INC coffers in the Philippines (Tuggy 1976:103-4). This includes not only seed money to dispatch and sustain a pioneering cohort of missionaries in each mission field, but also routine expenditures for the infrastructural costs of struggling and dependent congregations. Predictably, tens of millions of pesos have been invested over the years in overseas real estate. This involves enormous outlays for the purchase of older church buildings to accommodate embryonic locales, acquisition of large lots for modern *kapilya*, and maintenance of a growing inventory of parsonages, houses of worship, and associated religious structures.⁴² While procuring tangible property for overseas mission stations, the Central Office must also underwrite the costs

⁴² As implied earlier in this article, the pace of church construction and formation of individual *kapilya* provide a fair gauge of INC diffusion and membership growth in the Philippines. This is likewise the case throughout the INC's international mission. In most countries, the Iglesia ni Cristo begins its outreach by purchasing older religious buildings, social halls and even residential structures to house expanding committee prayers and fledging locales. As congregations increase in size and become financially stable, the Church generally proves willing to underwrite land purchases and building costs for modern houses of worship that reflect the architectural form of typical *kapilya* in the Filipino homeland. For a combined textual and pictorial record that reflects this process, see Bocobo (1983), Sarmiento (1993b) and the many profiles of individual foreign locales presented in *Pasugo* since 1968.

of ministerial and administrative staffs until congregations become self-supporting. Although the Church of Christ does not divulge financial information on its overseas operations, these expenses are undoubtedly burdensome for a religious institution born of and based in a Third World society. Yet the INC leadership clearly remains willing to cover these strategic costs of ongoing missionary outreach.

None should doubt the centralization of religious authority in the Iglesia ni Cristo. In all matters of doctrine, hermeneutics and appropriate socio-religious behaviour of believers, the ministerial leadership led by Eraño G. Manalo continues to speak with finality. The leadership's interpretation of the Bible and understanding of Christ's message to humankind is communicated to the INC membership at home and abroad through ministers trained exclusively at the College of Evangelical Ministry (CEM) in Quezon City. There, before receiving a BEM (Bachelor of Evangelical Ministry) degree, all candidates must complete a 6-year course of formal study and five years of probation as a regular evangelical worker for the Church. Only then are they eligible for ordination and assignment to leadership posts in individual locales. While many of the 4,500 collegians choose to enrol in more specialized programmes,⁴³ all must begin with a general curriculum focusing on the dogma, core values, propagation techniques and historical development of the Iglesia ni Cristo (Fuentes 1989). This is to serve as preparation for lifelong service as evangelists, religious educators, Church administrators or ministers of locales in the Philippines. Some of the best, however, opt for training in the ASFOM Programme (Advanced Studies for Overseas Missions) of the CEM (Fuentes 1994b; Peña-Javier 1996:9-10). They are ultimately charged with the complex task of evangelizing among immigrants and contract workers throughout the Filipino diaspora, assessing the influences of different secular cultures on faithful members, preserving the Church's doctrinal control in widespread congregations, nurturing local leadership in isolated locales, learning essential foreign languages and continuing outreach to non-Filipinos.⁴⁴

Aptly proud of the Church's flourishing mission in the Far West and

⁴³ Among these are the CLS (Center for Language Studies), FDP (Faculty Development Program), the Ministerial High School, DEP (Distance Education Program) and the ASFOM (Advanced Studies for Overseas Missions). Ministerial students in the CEM may also pursue joint studies through cooperative arrangements with several colleges at New Era University. When finished, they receive a BEM along with a Bachelor's degree in another field such as Education (BSE), Counseling (BSC), or Journalism (BSJ). The Church clearly recognizes that 'the work of ministers has grown more complex' in recent decades and is hence training ministers and evangelical workers who are 'adaptive and ready for [diverse] assignment at any time' (San Pedro 1999:6).

⁴⁴ The dedicated service and accomplishments of INC ministers posted in the Filipino diaspora are frequently acknowledged through short notices and photographs in *Pasugo* and certain INC anniversary volumes (Sarmiento 1993b:28-93, 104-19).

determined to continue expanding abroad, the Central Office closely monitors its far-flung administrative and ministerial organizations through a well supervised bureaucracy. To assure effective management of resident ministers and evangelical workers in distant regions and markedly different cultural realms, the Iglesia ni Cristo leadership has established 16 ecclesiastical districts that are overseen by trusted Supervising Ministers with experienced support staffs (A. Meimban 1998:7).⁴⁵ In addition, the INC created a Foreign Department in its Philippine headquarters in 1975 that functions as a clearinghouse for routine overseas operations, missionary initiatives and membership correspondence (Bocobo 1983:19; Fuentes 1986). This elaborate operational structure is further knit together through regular visits to locales by district officers and INC leaders from the Philippines (Bocobo 1994b; Lovendino 2000). Likewise, the Church periodically convenes regional conferences that bring together ministers and district officers for continuing religious education and mutual support (Royeca 1997). It also promotes grand evangelical meetings, youth rallies, Bible expositions and public debates that attract thousands of members and interested outsiders (Rosquites 1980:10-1; Boyer 1986:79-87), as well as impressive dedications of church and office buildings that verify the continuing growth of the INC (Galvez 1999; Abella 1994). It is especially noteworthy that over the past two decades the Iglesia ni Cristo has endeavoured to integrate its worldwide religious community and to proselytize nonbelievers through the creative use of the print and electronic media. The monthly *Pasugo* and its special editions regularly highlight overseas missions through short articles about committee prayer groups and congregations in distant lands. These informative profiles provide historical and geographic sketches of locales, tributes to dedicated lay leaders and evidence of INC progress through pictures of newly built *kapilya* and group photographs of assembled congregations (Sarmiento 1993b:28-93). Similarly, the INC quickly adopts cutting-edge technology to facilitate expansion of its foreign mission. Since 1983, the Church has regularly broadcast its message on selected TV and radio stations in North America, Australia and elsewhere (Boyer 1986:79; Paran 1989:157-8). Additionally, the Central Office employs long-distance videoconferencing to converse with regional deputies around the world (Vallejos 1994). It also strongly endorses the use of fax machines, e-mail and the internet to facilitate multidirectional linkages among INC officials and members worldwide (R. Meimban 1995; Meimban and Plopino 1995).

⁴⁵ Mission stations that remain especially fragile or geographically isolated – the so called 'independent congregations' – may still be administered directly by the Church's officialdom in Quezon City (Sarmiento 1993b:55).

Epilogue: Towards a cosmopolitan religious community

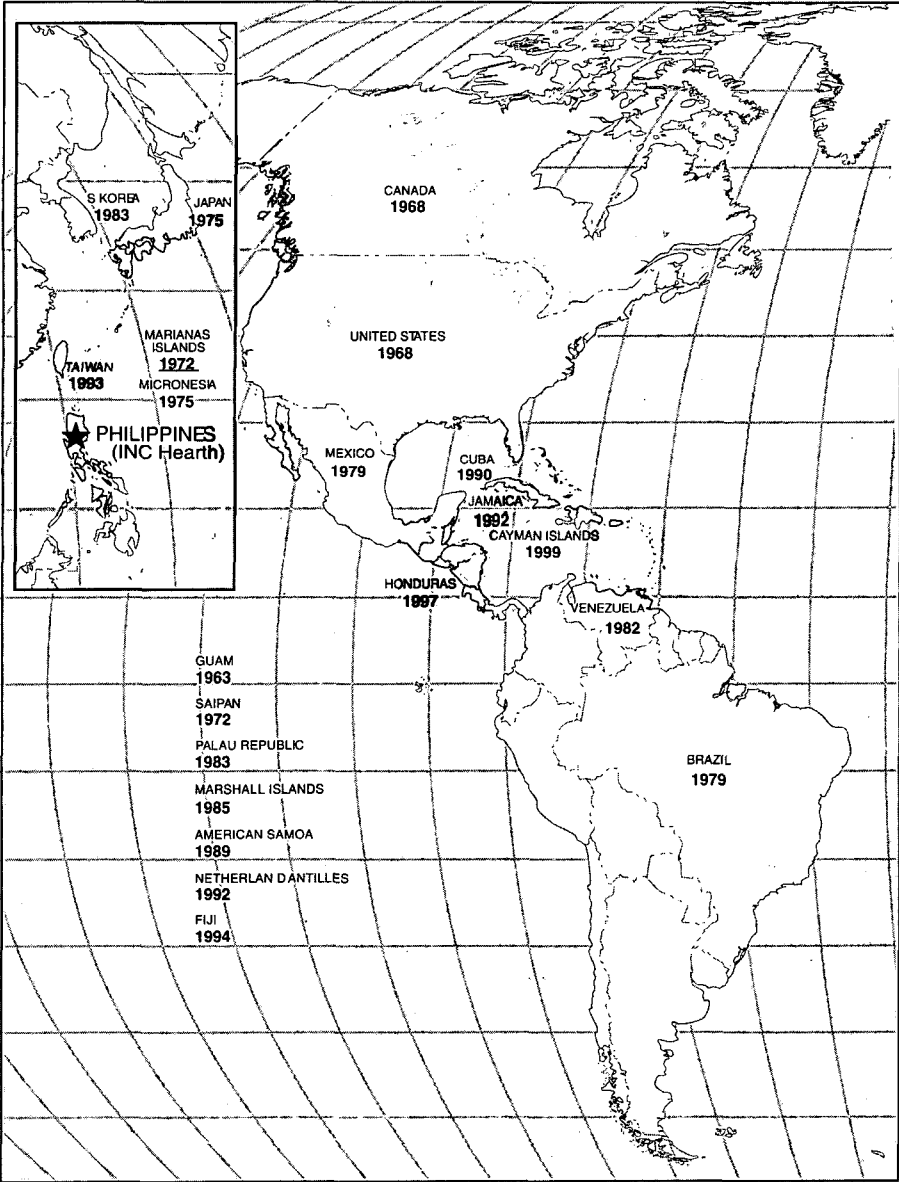
More than a triumphant form of 'indigenous Christianity' in the Philippines,⁴⁶ the Iglesia ni Cristo continues to extend its religious reach abroad and seems to be forging an expansive empire of faith that appeals to many overseas Filipinos and some people within their host societies. Today the Church manages an impressive system of approximately 400 foreign committee prayers and locales.⁴⁷ The INC is in fact solidly established on four continents and has important religious outposts in Africa, Latin America and various parts of the island world (Map 1). Predictably, the far-flung dispersal of its mission stations clearly reflects the shape and concentration of migrants in the Filipino diaspora.

In the United States, the proliferation of prayer groups and congregations over the past thirty years has been nothing less than spectacular. More than 150 such establishments are now found in 39 states that harbour significant communities of Asian-Americans.⁴⁸ Their distribution vividly reflects a conspicuous presence of immigrants from the Philippines together with their first-generation progeny in California, Florida, Hawaii, New Jersey, New York, Texas and Washington (Allen and Turner 1988:185-8). Substantial foundations of the Church of Christ are also to be found elsewhere in North America, including 16 in Canada, three in Mexico and a handful in nations around the Caribbean (Map 2). Though widely dispersed in East Asia, Europe, Southwest Asia, North Africa and Southeast Asia, committee prayers and locales are in fact found in many of the capitals and large cities. Mirroring its large population of Filipino oil field labourers, Libya now has 14 INC outposts; Australia, with its large influx of Filipino immigrants, embraces some 30; and Japan, with its substantial population of Filipino contract labourers, recently recorded a total of 35. A wide scattering of INC missions is also to be found in Oceania, sub-Saharan Africa and South America (Map 3).

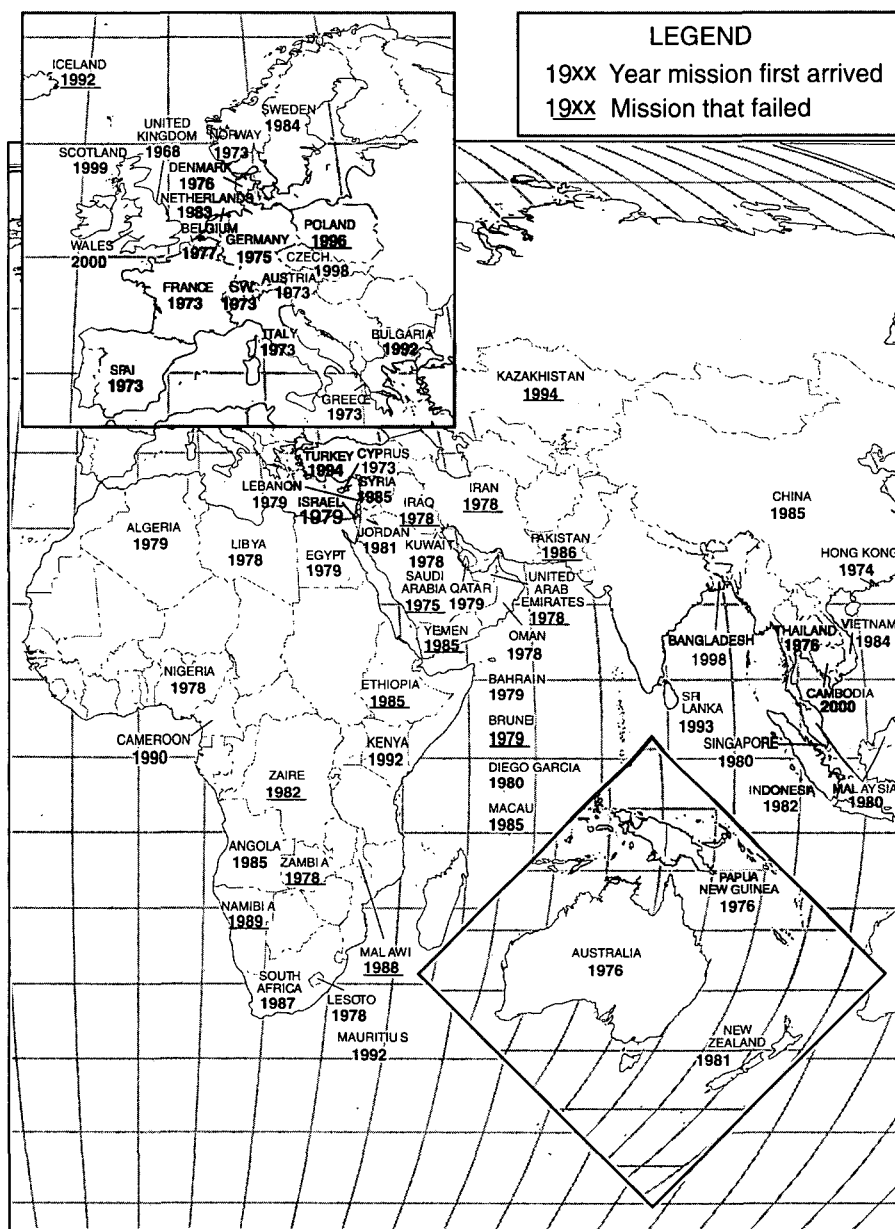
⁴⁶ See footnote 8.

⁴⁷ Two years ago, Adriel O. Meimban (1998:7) claimed a total of '543 locales, extensions, [and] committee prayer groups in 74 countries' of the INC's overseas mission. But recent issues of *Pasugo* list only 200 overseas congregations and almost as many committee prayer groups in 72 countries. There are few references to extant extensions, which presumably remain registered under individual locales and so do not have separate notations in the *Pasugo* inventories. In any event, this writer has accepted the lower number of some 400 mission stations because each can be verified through its published address, telephone and fax numbers, and times of worship (*Pasugo* 2000:52-3:31-9; *Pasugo* 2000 52-6:31-9).

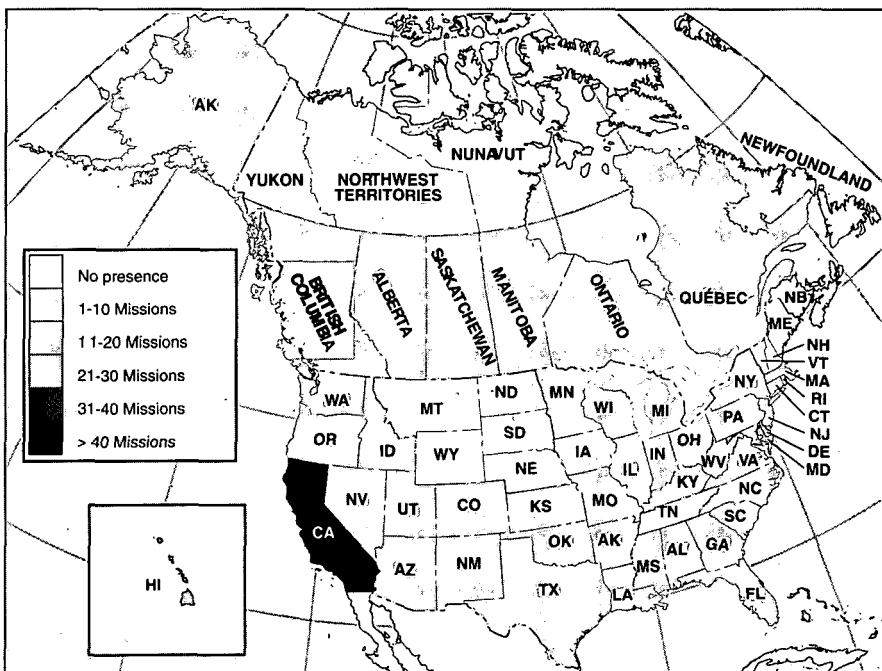
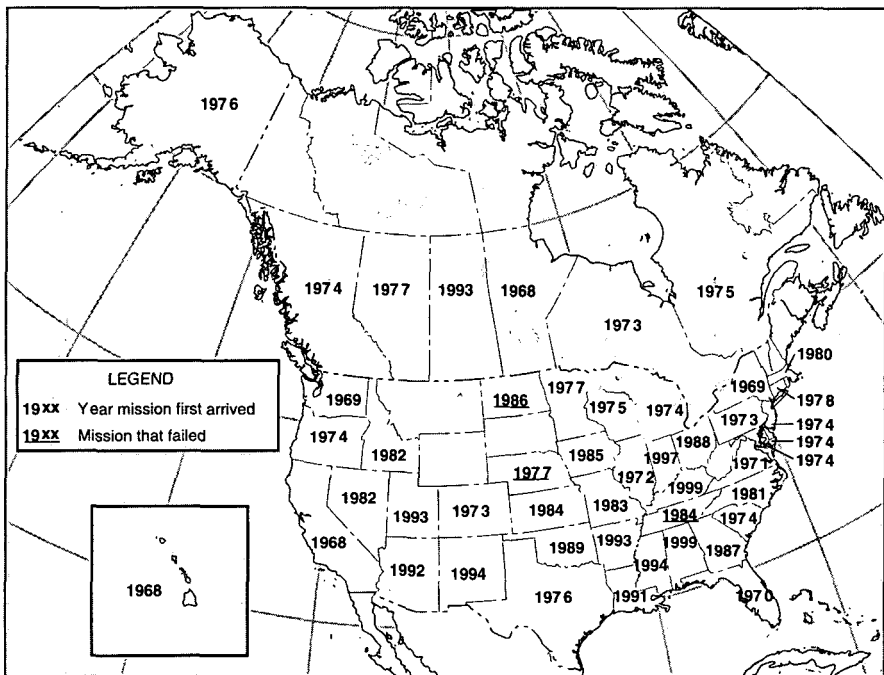
⁴⁸ Although North Dakota and Tennessee once had INC missions, these were later disbanded. Nine other states (Delaware, Maine, Montana, New Hampshire, Nebraska, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Vermont and Wyoming), which have very small Filipino-American populations, are still without committee prayers or congregations.



Map 1. Worldwide diffusion of Iglesia ni Cristo missions, 2000



Source: *Pasugo* 1968-2000

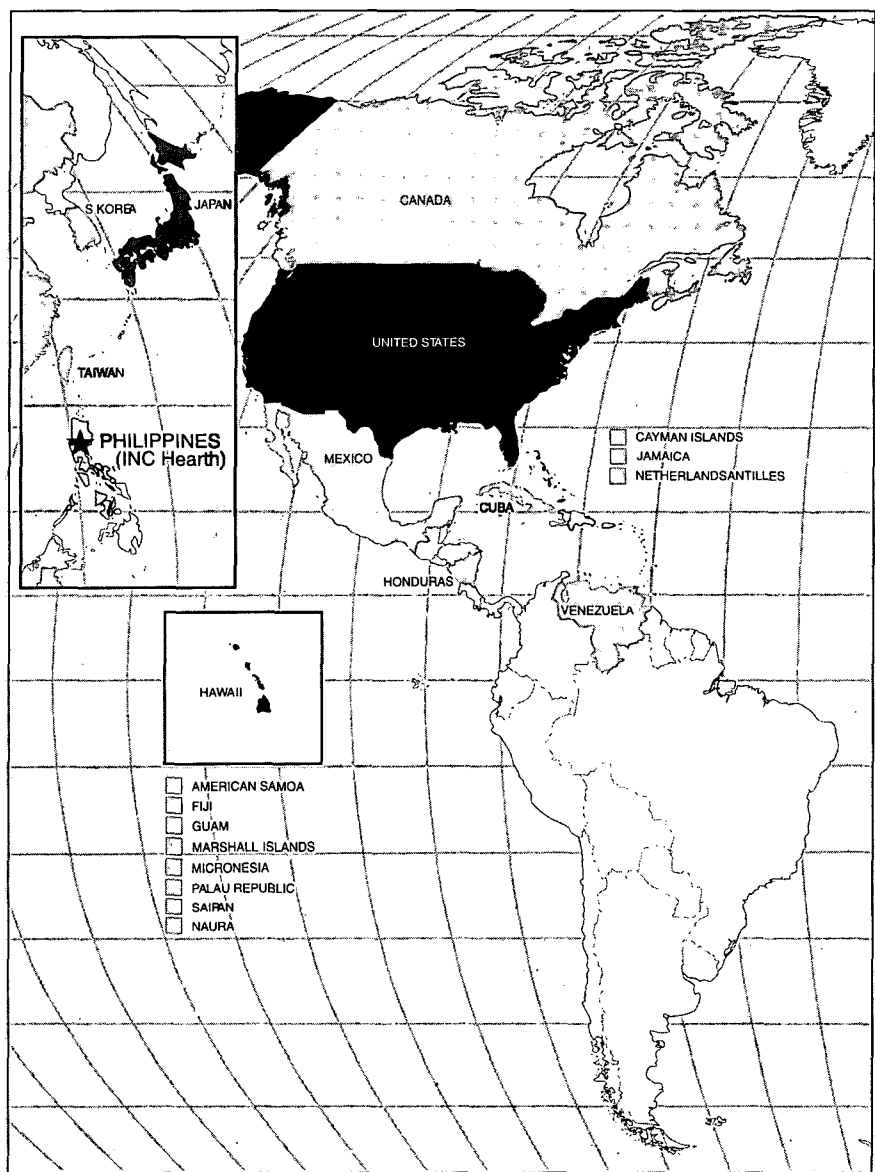


If recent growth patterns in its overseas mission are a sign of things to come, one may fairly conclude that the Iglesia ni Cristo will continue to expand abroad through tandem processes of Filipino immigration and conversions of people in various host societies. The latter phenomenon has been convincingly documented in *Pasugo* since the early 1970s through confessional letters from American and European converts.⁴⁹ Although testimonials from Filipino citizens had long graced the pages of INC publications, such affidavits of faith by foreign brethren clearly marked an unexpected conversional trend and suggested that the Church of Christ might increasingly assume a multi-ethnic character. Many of the early converts were in fact American sailors and airmen stationed at two key U.S. military installations in the Philippines (Subic Naval Station and Clark Air Force Base). They were usually introduced to the Church by Filipina friends or spouses and remained true to their newfound faith after returning to the United States. Over the past three decades, however, these personal statements by non-Filipino brethren have become standard literary fare in *Pasugo* and come from converts in Europe, North America, Australia, Japan, Southeast Asia and other parts of the world. Their increasing membership in hundreds of overseas committee prayers and locales is proved through numerous group photographs in anniversary issues celebrating the INC's overseas mission (Sarmiento 1993b:28-93), thereby suggesting that the Church of Christ is indeed becoming a more diverse religious community.⁵⁰

Anticipating the evolution of an increasingly internationalized Iglesia ni Cristo as this century wears on, the Central Office is now admitting a select group of foreign students to the College of Evangelical Ministry (Boyer 1986: 87; Abella 1988). Many if not most of these young men are the offspring of Filipino immigrants who belong to the INC and are hence familiar with the religio-cultural heritage of this indigenous Philippine church. Nevertheless, a small but critical contingent is comprised of Americans, Europeans and others from the Far West who tend to be enthusiastic converts and promising missionaries. Whatever their avenue of entry into the Church, a majority of the foreign-born students ultimately return to their homelands outside the Philippines following ministerial training and ordination (Rosquites 1993: 11). In various assignments as evangelical workers, resident ministers or district officials, these young men will play an important role in transforming

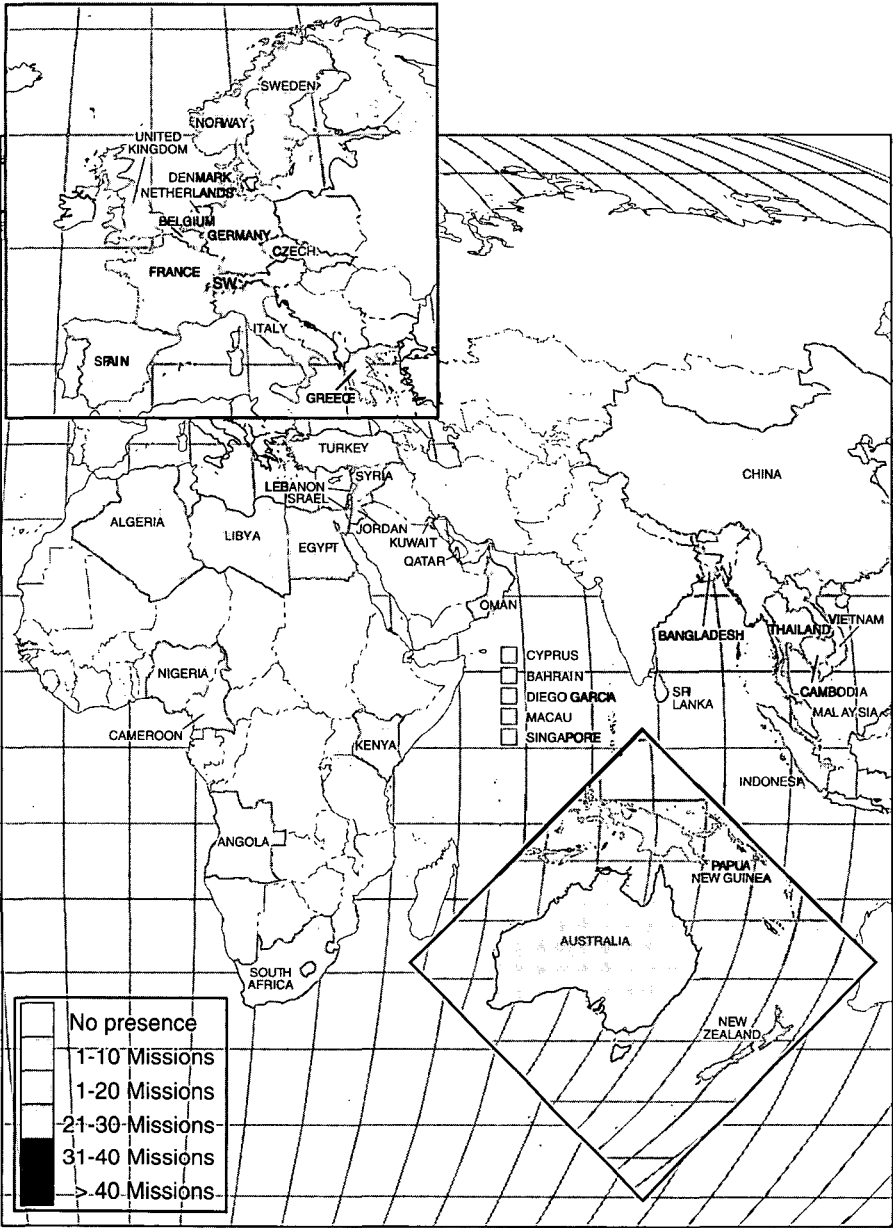
⁴⁹ For examples of early testimonies drawn from *Pasugo*, see Watson (1971), Ringwood (1973), Royal (1973) and Belen (1975).

⁵⁰ At least one informed reporter on the INC has described this trend towards an ethnically diverse membership as a minor phenomenon that will never foster a truly integrated Church. Even while noting the presence of non-Filipino worshippers in the pews of California locales as early as 1976, Arthur L. Tuggy (1976:104) still asserted that the Iglesia ni Cristo was 'unlikely to attract a mass following' of believers in the United States.



Source: *Pasugo* 1968-2000

Map 3. Worldwide distribution of Iglesia ni Cristo missions, 2000



the Iglesia ni Cristo into a truly 'universalizing' belief system.⁵¹

The spread of the Iglesia ni Cristo throughout the Filipino diaspora confirms the oft repeated geographical proverb that belief systems frequently diffuse from a religious hearth to distant places through processes of immigration (Sopher 1967:79-94; Park 1994:93-127). Such diffusion in the American sector of the Filipino diaspora was certainly evident by the late 1960s. Foreseeing the continuing migration of INC members to the United States, Canada, Australia and elsewhere, the Church officialdom led by Eraño G. Manalo decided to invest substantial human and financial resources in overseas outreach that would provide an institutional structure and church buildings for a community composed of loyal believers and redeemable lost brethren. This foreign mission not only prospered, but through active proselytizing by ministers and members alike soon began to incorporate Filipino immigrants of other faiths and a surprising number of American, Australian, European and other converts. The genius of the younger Manalo and his advisors was further demonstrated by their willingness to fashion a missionary training programme within the curriculum of the College of Evangelical Ministry and then to systematically recruit candidates from INC congregations abroad. These included the children of INC migrants together with people of different ethnic and national heritages.⁵² If such trends continue – religious outreach to people of all backgrounds, spousal conversions and recruitment of non-Filipinos to the ministry – the Iglesia ni Cristo will surely take on a more cosmopolitan complexion during the 21st century.

⁵¹ Unlike 'ethnic' religions that are geographically localized, bound to a singular culture, and without general appeal, the 'universalizing' belief systems (Islam, Buddhism, Catholicism and the various Protestant denominations) are conceived as exclusive avenues of human salvation. In the words of David E. Sopher (1967:7), they 'a) are considered by their adherents to be proper to all mankind, b) have mechanisms to facilitate their transmittal, c) have at some time successfully broken through the restrictions of a special relationship to place or particular social group, and d) have been established as dominant religions at least on a regional scale'. Although the INC has not yet achieved dominance in any region of the Philippines, it certainly embraces the other three ingredients of a universalizing faith.

⁵² This integrative effort was beginning to change the composition of the Iglesia ni Cristo missionary corps during the late 1980s. In the 25th anniversary volume of the Church's foreign mission journal *God's message*, the register of resident ministers (with their photographs) assigned to American congregations already included a sprinkling of Caucasians (Sarmiento 1993b:104-19).

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